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AUTHOR Wyman, Elizabeth A.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

In order to examine how the manipulation of the stylistic and semantic attributes of a counselor's language affects client perceptions of counselor expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness, 132 college students (88 females, 44 males) were randomly assigned to listen to one of four counseling audiotapes; the tapes were identical as to topic and script but contained varied selected semantic and stylistic features of counselor language. After listening to the tapes, subjects indicated their perceptions of the counselor's social influence, using the Counselor Rating Form. The counselor role transcripts were processed through the Computer Assisted Language Analysis System (CALAS), to identify semantic variation indicated by verb type (action or state), and stylistic variation (simple or complex) indicated by phrases per clause and total number of words. Analysis of results showed that counselor use of complex language yielded more favorable expertness ratings than did use of stylistically simple language. The findings indicate modest support for the proposition that language variables influence perceptions of counselor social influence. (BH)

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The Effects of Semantic and Stylistic Variations in Language on Perceptions of Social Influence Characteristics

Elizabeth A. Wyman, Mark A. Hector, and Naomi M. Meara

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The Effects of Semantic and Stylistic Variations in Language on Perceptions of Social Influence Characteristics

Some research has indicated that different language patterns may be observed depending on the therapeutic orientation of the counselor (Meara, Shannon, & Pepinsky, 1979). There is also evidence to indicate that client's language patterns are influenced by the language usage of the counselor and that analysis of language patterns provide the observer with information from which to infer the policies of interactive treatment (Pepinsky & DeStefano, 1983). But data are sparse related to the how specific attributes of a counselor's language influence client perceptions of counselor effectiveness, and thus other dimensions of the therapeutic encounter. The purpose of this study is to investigate how the manipulation of stylistic and semantic attributes of a counselor's language affects potential client perceptions of that counselor's expertness, attractiveness and trustworthiness. The study represents a first empirical attempt to provide a link between the social influence and language analysis literatures.

Two primary studies were conducted (Wyman, 1981a; Wyman, 1981b), to settle on the procedures which are discussed below in the Method section. Based on this pilot work and research reviewed elsewhere (especially Bieber, 1978; Bieber, Patton & Fuhriman, 1977; Meara et al., 1979; Meara, Pepinsky, Shannon & Murray, 1981; Patton, Fuhriman & Bieber, 1977; Wyman, 1981b), we expected that no main effect would

be found for the semantic variable of verb type usage. The stylistic component, however, was expected to have a significant effect on subject perceptions of counselors' expertness, trustworthiness and attractiveness.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 88 female and 44 male undergraduate students who volunteered to participate in exchange for course credit. Subjects who volunteered but who were not considered fluent in English were excluded from the study. Thirty-three subjects were randomly assigned to each treatment condition which consisted of listening to one of four counseling audiotapes that systematically differed in terms of the semantic and stylistic properties of the counselor's language. After listening to a tape, each subject rated their perceptions of the counselor's social influence.

Procedure

Stimulus tapes. Four counseling audiotapes were recorded using actors who followed carefully structured scripts. The topic and the client's script were identical across all four conditions while each counseling script varied selected semantic and stylistic features of language. In addition to the language manipulation, two primary objectives in developing the scripts were to achieve natural sounding wording and to ensure that a consistent and adequate counseling skill level was portrayed across the four counselor scripts. Two counseling

psychologists studied the scripts and verified that an acceptable level of counseling skill was maintained.

Each audiotape was approximately 20 minutes long and consisted of two segments, the first from an initial interview and the next from a second interview. The client's concern was portrayed as basically vocational; however, she also mentioned issues of poor interpersonal relations with parents and boyfriends.

The same actor and actress played the roles of the counselor and client respectively on all tapes. Their only instructions were to maintain a consistent intonation and rate of speech on all four tapes. Both role players were unaware of the hypotheses of this study.

Independent variables. The semantic and stylistic properties of the counselor's language were the independent variables. The semantic variation was accomplished by manipulating the counselor's use of one of two verb types: state and action. State verbs define a particular noncausal relation between persons or things, or a state or property of persons or things (e.g., I am angry. The house is warm.). Action verbs define a causal relationship with specification of an agent (e.g., Matt hit Kevin. Ellen kicked the ball.) (Meara, et al., 1981).

The stylistic variable was divided into two levels of language complexity, simple and complex. The number of phrases per clause and the total number of words per interview were the two measures of

level of complexity. With the manipulations of the semantic and stylistic properties of the counselor's language, a 2x2 factorial design was produced. The four types of counselor language were state simple, action simple, state complex, and action complex.

Procedural check -- CALAS. In order to verify the numerical description of the levels of the independent variables, the four counselor role transcripts were entered verbatim into the DEC System 10 and processed through the Computer Assisted Language Anlysis System (CALAS) (Rush, et al., 1974; Pepinsky, Baker, Matalon, May & Staubus, 1977). The CALAS programs provide three separate sequential operations: (1) Eyeball, translation of the text into grammatical categories (e.g., noun, verb, adjective, adverb); (2) Phraser, aggregation of grammatical class assignments into phrases (e.g., noun phrase, verb phrase, prepositional phrase); and (3) Clause and Case, grouping the phrases into clauses (e.g., main and subordinate) and assigning labels derived from case grammar to each phrase in the clause. After each operation, the system provides for human editing to increase the accuracy of the input into the next phase. The human editing in this study represented the consensus of three individuals well versed in case grammar and the CALAS. The CALAS output was used to verify the frequency of use of each verb type usage, and phrases per clause. The results of the procedural check are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Dependent variables. Subject perceptions of the counselor were measured using the Counseling Rating Form (CRF; Barak & LaCrosse, 1975) which was designed "to measure the social influence dimensions of perceived counselor expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness" (LaCrosse, 1980, p. 322). The CRF consists of 36 seven-point bipolar adjectives, 12 pairs for each dimension. Scores on each dimension range from a minimum of 12 to a maximum of 84. Split-half reliability coefficients are .87 for expertness, .85 for attractiveness, and .91 for trustworthiness (LaCrosse & Barak, 1976). Data on the CRF suggest that it has predictive validity for immediate post-counseling outcomes (LaCrosse, 1980) and that it is useful in measuring differences in perceptions of counselor characteristics (Barak & Dell, 1977; Barak & LaCrosse, 1975; LaCrosse & Barak, 1976).

Data collection. The senior author scheduled subjects by telephone for individual appointments to report to a media center to listen to one of the counseling audiotapes and to record their perceptions of the counselor using the Counselor Rating Form (CRF; Barak & LaCrosse, 1975). Each subject arriving at the media center office was given one audiotape, a set of headphones and a five-page packet including instructions, informed consent statement and CRF. Subjects were assigned to individual carrels equipped with an audiotape player. Before turning on the tape, all subjects read and signed an informed consent form. They next listened to the tape and filled out the CRF. The experimental task required a maximum

of 30 minutes to complete. When they finished, the subjects returned the headphones and tape to the media center office and took the completed CRF and informed consent form to the secretary in a room specified on the instruction sheet. There they received a voucher for course credit. The consent statement included instructions for obtaining a debriefing session by the senior author.

Other than the initial telephone contact, subjects were processed through the experimental task by persons who were naive concerning the hypotheses of the study. During this phone contact it was impossible for the senior author to know the experimental condition to which a subject would eventually be assigned.

Data analysis. The CRF was scored so that a high score on a social influence dimension represented a less favorable rating of the counselor on that dimension than did a low score. A 2x2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to determine the effect of the variation in the semantic and stylistic components of the counselor's language on subjects' perceptions of the counselor's social influence. The analysis was performed via the SAS computer program's General Linear Models procedure (PROC GLM) (SAS, 1979).

Results

The assumption of equal dispersion matrices was not tested because the sample size was large (N=132) and cell sizes were equal. Using the Wilks' lambda criterion, the MANOVA results indicated that there was a significant multivariate effect for verb type usage and

complexity but there was no significant overall interaction effect, see Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

The significant multivariate F for verb type usage was unexpected and suggested that perceptions of the counselor might be influenced in early interviews by the counselor's verb type usage. The MANOVA was followed by a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine which social influence dimensions were accounting for the significant main effect for verb type. As shown in Table 3, however, the results of this univariate follow-up were not significant for any of the three dimensions.

Insert Table 3 about here

The significant multivate F for language complexity was expected as it was anticipated that a counselor using a complex language style would receive higher ratings than a counselor using a simple style. The results of a follow-up analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that the difference between high and low complexity was significant in the expertness dimension (see Table 3). Counselor use of a complex language style yielded more favorable expertness ratings than did use of stylistically simple language.

Discussion

There are several cautions in interpreting the results of this research. The general limitations of analog studies as explicated by Gelso (1979) and Goldman (1976), apply to this work. It seems important to remember, in particular, that the subjects were undergraduates naive about counseling and probably not experiencing the level of stress or openness to change that might be typical of a client.

The limitations inherent using this measuring instrument for this purpose need to be considered. The brevity of exposure may affect the validity of a subjects' ratings. Several researchers (Giannandrea & Murphy, 1973; Hoffman-Graff, 1977; Mann & Murphy, 1975) have noted that choosing a rating upon a six or seven point scale may be too complicated a task following a single brief exposure.

There is one threat to external validity that is inherent in and unique to the design of this study. Although subjects were instructed to respond to and rate only the counselor, it is possible that the client's responses and the pattern of counselor-client interactive discourse influenced their ratings. The client responses remained constant across the four experimental conditions. Furthermore, it is reasonable to speculate that in an actual session, the client's language would have been influenced by the counselor's and thus the nature of the interaction would have been different. In this analogue session, the counselor and the client were not mutually

engaged in establishing the ground rules or policies for treatment. In Pepinsky and DeStefano's (1983) terms, the subjects were asked to rate the counselor in the process of "unilateral" policy making.

While the design enabled the investigators to isolate counselor language, it did reduce opportunities for spontaneous interaction. Since the client-counselor interaction was not spontaneous, subtle displays of warmth, concern or empathy on the part of the counselor were probably lower than they might have been in an actual counseling session. This could have accounted for the relatively low attractiveness ratings given to the counselor across all experimental conditions.

In spite of these cautions, the study does have implications for further work and for counseling practice. There is some modest support for the proposition that language variables do influence perceptions of a counselor's social influence. The clearest effect seems to be the relationship between stylistically complex language and perceived expertness. It seems somewhat ironic that beginning trainees are often instructed to be brief and simple in their interactions with clients, and yet the stylistically complex counselor is viewed as more expert. These findings provide a possible explanation for Schmidt and Strong's (1971) work which found an inverse relationship between amount of counselor training and/or experience and the level of expertness assigned to them by psychology students. This would suggest that by instructing counselors to be simple we are depriving them of a source of perceived expertness, at least with naive clients.

The results also suggested that the CRF may not be equally sensitive in measuring all three dimensions. In all four experimental conditions, the counselor was rated very low on attractiveness while expertness and trustworthiness were clustered together at a higher level. This conforms to Barak and LaCrosse's finding (1975) that in all of their experimental groups counselors were rated significantly more trustworthy than attractive. This result also affirms Barak, Patkim and Dell's (1982) work which suggested that the degree of attractiveness may have an inverse relationship to perceptions of expertness. The results suggest a two dimensional structure of social influence with expertness and trustworthiness combined under a construct called "credibility" (cf., Barak & LaCrosse, 1975), although the later work of Corrigan & Schmidt (1983) does not support this interpretation. Further research might be more informative if the Counselor Rating Form-Short Version is used since confirmatory factor analyses computed by Corrigan and Schmidt (1983) indicated a three factor oblique model best accounted for their data.

The study represents an exploratory effort to link the natural language research pioneered by Pepinsky (1974) and the social influence literature sparked by Strong's (1968) seminal paper. Both areas of inquiry seek to focus on process related to therapeutic change. As Borgen (1984) notes in reviewing Strong and Claiborn's (1982) work, the focus is on "generic processes underlying therapeutic change" (p. 582) while the Pepinsky work probes "the counselor interaction

at the most basic level" . . . "the structure of language usage" . . . "positing that counseling moves toward 'concerted action'" (Borgen, 1984, p. 586).

This study provides an initial glimpse of possible relationships between policies of treatment and the perceived social influence of the counselor. As noted above, earlier work (Patton et al., 1977; Meara et al., 1979; Meara et al., 1981; Pepinsky & DeStefano, 1983) has suggested how clients and counselors work out the ground rules for treatment through the exchange of natural language signals. The present research provides modest support for the notion that the language of treatment is related to the perceived social influence of the counselor. In this specific case, stylistic complexity was related to perceived expertness. This might indicate that language not only exerts what might be termed a primary effect in directly shaping the interaction, but also a secondary effect in influencing the client's perceptions of the counselor. These perceptions, in turn, would influence the interaction, although possibly less directly than the language itself. In future investigations, it might be fruitful to focus upon not only the relationship between treatment policies and social influence, but also upon the language of social influence itself. An initial question might concern what linguistic displays found in natural settings enhance the credibility of the counselor when measured along the dimensions of expertness, attractiveness and trustworthiness.

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Table 1

Numerical Description of the Variation in Semantic and Stylistic Variables in the Counselor's Language Among the Four Counseling Scripts

Script Description	Semantic Measures		Stylistic Measures	
	% Action Verbs	% State Verbs	Phrases/ Clause	Total Words
#1 State Simple	5	92	3.5	309
#2 Action Simple	83	3	3.7	305
#3 State Complex	15	74	5.2	565
#4 Action Comples	79	11	5.4	575

NOTE: The percent of action and state verbs within each script does not total 100. Other verb types were used to achieve natural sounding language.

Table 2

Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) of Perceived Counselor Expertness, Trustworthiness and Attractiveness by Verb Type Usage, Language Complexity and Verb Type/Language Complexity Interaction

Source	df	Multivariate F	P
Verb Type	3/126	4.20	.007*
Language Complexity	3/126	3.46	.018*
Verb Type/Language Complexity Interaction	3/126	0.95	.419

* = Significant at .05 level

Table 3

Results of ANOVA Tests of the Effects of Variations in the Verb Type Usage and Complexity of Counselor Language on Perception of Counselor Expertness, Trustworthiness and Attractiveness

Source	Expertness		Trustworthiness		Attractiveness	
	F	p	F	p	F	p
Verb Type	0.11	0.745	0.75	0.388	2.57	0.111
Complexity	5.25	0.024*	0.90	0.344	0.34	0.559
Interaction	0.08	0.781	0.00	0.961	0.87	0.352

* = Significant at .05 level

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Naomi M. Meara, Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee 37996-3400.